

The Art of Facilitation

This brief paper will remind you of the aspects of effective facilitation you've noticed at previous meetings and workshops, so that you can put them to work as you conduct a meeting.

Though facilitation techniques are not technical, most people don't even think of facilitation as a practice that requires attention; they just run the meeting.

But facilitation can be challenging, for example, when you have the responsibility to produce a certain result from a group's conversation or if you are overly focused on the content of the discussion.

The best facilitators are positive, energetic, assertive, and respectful. They work well with a wide variety of people and are well organized. They're willing to manage the group process and the flow of information without taking over or manipulating the group's decisions and without being the center of attention.

Arguably the most important thing you can do as a facilitator is to subordinate your needs to those of the group. Though you may want a particular result from the meeting, your responsibility is to ensure that the group gets what it wants. As a bonus, if you facilitate well, someone will probably make your points for you and you will be satisfied with the results.

You're not a superior who tells the group what to do; you're a guide for a group whose members share decisions and responsibilities. This "servant leadership" helps groups perform

more effectively by harnessing the skills and potential of all members. When members of a group fully participate and share in decisions, they'll commit to the results.

Have fun! Establish an atmosphere of friendly, open sharing of ideas. Encourage participants to take risks by taking risks yourself.

When in doubt, check with the group. It's not your responsibility to know everything. If at any point you're not sure how to proceed, ask participants what they'd like to do (though group decisions regarding group process should be avoided in most cases). Offer options, but leave the decision to them. Be open to criticism from the group; you're there for their benefit. It's their right to hold you accountable.

When facilitating a meeting, it's crucial that you be aware on two levels: content (the subject being discussed) and process (how group members interact). As you prepare the agenda and define expectations with the group, focus mainly on content. But once the meeting is under way, concentrate primarily on process. Be careful not to let your interest in the content distract you from the workings of the group. For some people, this is especially challenging. But a group whose facilitator is wrapped up in content is a ship without a rudder.

Assure participants that the group process is your first priority. If necessary, assure them that your task is not to control the outcome of the

discussion, but rather to ensure that the outcome is satisfactory to them.

Keep the discussion moving at a lively pace. Each time you explain anything, ask participants if they have any questions. But phrase your question in a way that doesn't imply that they've misunderstood. Rather, ask if anything you said was unclear. This way of phrasing the question puts the "blame" for misunderstanding on you, and therefore makes it a little easier for shy people to ask questions.

Keep the Group Focused

It's easy to become absorbed in the details of discussions. Keeping people focused on the topic retains their interest and involvement, and avoids frustration. You may need to clarify (or ask for clarification) and summarize discussions to bring them into focus.

Make sure everyone understands the subject, purpose, and progress of the discussion from the outset. If there are awkward silences when everyone seems to be waiting for someone else to say something, participants may not know what they're supposed to be discussing or how to approach the subject.

If the discussion wanders, remind participants of the subject and steer them back to it. But allowing for creative discussion while keeping the group on purpose is a delicate balancing act. If a digression seems useful, ask participants if they want to continue on that path or get back on the main road. If the discussion becomes circular, say something like, "Has this subject been thoroughly covered? Should we move on?"

Trust your intuition. If you think the discussion should change direction or move on, others probably feel the same way. Check with the group, then make the change. They'll probably be pleased, and you can't go wrong if you check with them first.

To avoid discussions that drift from one topic to another, assure that each item has been resolved before moving on to the next. As decisions are made, note the actions required. Sometimes the discussion will begin to drift, particularly regarding complex topics, and no specific closure is possible. Summarizing the issues or points being considered will often lead to a prompt end to the discussion.

Employ Active Listening

This may be the most potent and important suggestion. Active listening is the foundation of effective communication. The more emotion there is in a conversation, the more you need to listen actively. When people understand that you're listening to them, they'll listen to you and others; they'll want to work with you and the group.

Active listening is based on three skills: acknowledging, empathizing, and clarifying. These skills are easy enough to understand; in fact, you probably already know them. But using them requires practice.

As you work with your group, look for the positive. During discussion, *acknowledge* people for making perceptive comments, going out on a limb, showing a willingness to volunteer or to work with an adversary—whatever positive aspects you find.

There's no need to patronize; just make sure people are clearly acknowledged for what they've said or done.

Don't, however, gloss over difficulties. Rather, in highly charged meetings, when participants indicate they're having a problem or are upset, *empathize* by letting them know that you understand what they're going through. You might note similar difficulties that you've had.

Empathy isn't sympathy. For instance, "I get the feeling that you're angry" is an empathetic statement. It acknowledges important feelings, it confirms that what is being said is being heard. In contrast, "He shouldn't have done that to you" is sympathetic. It supports negative feelings and judges who is wrong or right, which is inappropriate for a facilitator.

When people talk about issues that are important to them, their statements can become a bit jumbled. One excellent way to help them find their way through the tangle is to *clarify*—say what you think you heard them say. Carefully reframe, rather than interpret, their statements. That is, don't color the clarification with your values, needs, perceptions, and assumptions (even if you think you're right). Another way to clarify is to summarize. For instance, when several points are made over the course of a long statement, you can help by summarizing the points and checking with the speaker or speakers that your summary is correct. Summarizing can be a powerful means to focus group conversation and keep it on track.

You'll find that some people repeat their points, sometimes endlessly. Usually, they repeat themselves

because they think no one has heard them. As facilitator, you can eliminate most repetition by summarizing and clarifying. If they hear you say it, they'll feel less need to repeat it.

These active listening techniques are important to any communication. They may seem obvious, but they're easier said than done. Many of us tend to talk and not listen. Practice acknowledging, empathizing, and clarifying with your friends and family. You'll be amazed at the results.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming can make problem-solving fun and maximize creativity. It's an excellent way to start a conversation or workshop that will later shift to more rigorous discussion. The following points are a few guidelines for brainstorming that you may want to offer your group:

- *Be open to new ideas*—even those that seem impossible.
- *Listen to the full explanation of each idea*—don't interrupt. (But the facilitator should encourage participants to make their comments short.)
- *Encourage one another's participation*—everyone's ideas are necessary for success.

Another that has become conventional wisdom is that participants should avoid criticizing ideas offered by others. But it turns out that there is no data to support this idea and plenty of data to the contrary. Suffice to say that, when criticisms are offered, the facilitator should watch carefully to ensure that

the person originating the idea is not discouraged from participating.

But possibly the most important guideline is for the facilitator: Always begin brainstorming with one or more specific questions rather than simply saying, “Let’s discuss x.”

Positions versus interests

Generally speaking, when two parties are engaged in an argument, each states their particular “position” then holds onto it dearly. For example, group A’s position is that we must build a resort on the piece of land in question, while group B’s position is that we must leave the land as is.

If the conversation proceeds as an argument between these two positions, resolution is unlikely. Something as simple as an amiable conversation may seem impossible.

In contrast, an argument can transform into a genuine problem-solving conversation when the facilitator causes the parties to explore the reasons for their respective positions, that is, their underlying “interests.” Even when positions seem intractable, solutions can be found at the intersection of those respective interests. Active listening is often the means to explore those interests. In particular, when one person asserts a position, respectfully ask them the

reasons for that position. Among those reasons, you can find their underlying interests.

Keep the Basics in Mind

Your Attitude

1. Dual awareness: Be aware of both the content of the discussion [relatively easy] and process [more subtle group dynamics].
2. Your interests are secondary. Subordinate the points you wish to make to those that others in the group wish to make.
3. Be invisible: Intervene respectfully and discreetly.

Action

1. Focus: If the discussion wanders, remind participants of the subject and steer them back to it.
2. Closure: Assure that each item has been resolved before moving on to the next.
3. Clarify and summarize —helps keep the focus and lead to closure.
4. Ensure full participation, instead of domination by a few people.

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